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After the Fall

In the wake of an historic defeat, can India's communists finally break with the hidebound dogmas of their past?

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Dagbazar, in north Kolkata.



I

THE RECENT DEFEAT of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala and -especially in West Bengal—where it ruled for 34 uninterrupted years—calls for a detached, dispassionate analysis of the party's place in the history of modern India.

In what manner, and to what extent, did politicians committed in theory to the construction of a one-party state reconcile themselves in practice to bourgeois democracy? What were the sources of the CPI(M)'s electoral appeal in Kerala and West Bengal? How were its policies constrained or enabled by its ideology of Marxism-Leninism? How should this ideology be rethought or reworked in the light of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the manifest attachment of the people of India to multiparty democracy? How might the CPI(M) restore and reinvent itself after these electoral reversals in Kerala and West Bengal?

In seeking to answer these questions, I shall start with the analysis of a printed text. This is apposite, since Marxists are as much in thrall to the printed word, or Word, as are fundamentalist Muslims or Christians. True, their God had more than one Messenger, and these messengers wrote multiple Holy Books. Withal, like Christianity and Islam, Marxism is a faith whose practice is very heavily determined by its texts. Thus, communists the world over justify their actions on the basis of this or that passage in the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao.

It was the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who first drew attention to the parallels between a professedly secular belief system and religious doctrine. In a 1968 book called *Marxism and Christianity*, MacIntyre observed that "creedal uniformity, as in religion, often seems to be valued by Marxists for its own sake". He added that this secular creed, like its religious counterpart,

endowed its adherents with an emancipatory role denied to individuals who believed in more humdrum ideologies. To quote MacIntyre, "both Marxism and Christianity rescue individual lives from the insignificance of finitude...by showing the individual that he has or can have some role in a world-historical drama." In this, Marxism and Christianity are akin to one another, and to Islam, whose devoted or dogmatic adherents likewise believe that their life and death find meaning and fulfilment in a pleasure-filled and enemy-free utopia.

II

THE TEXT that I shall here subject to scrutiny—the technical term may be 'exegesis'—was written not by Marx or Lenin, but by a desi deity, so to say. One of the most influential of all Indian Marxists, his name was Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive. He was known as 'BTR', and these initials were whispered with respect, or might we say reverence, by party members past and present.

The text that I am going to resurrect was written in 1978, a year after a Left Front government dominated by the CPI(M) came to power in the large and crucial state of West Bengal. It took the shape of an extended review of a book by the Spanish communist Santiago Carrillo, entitled *Eurocommunism and the State*. The review was published over 33 closely printed pages of *Social Scientist*, a Marxist monthly edited by scholars associated with the Jawaharlal Nehru University. Here, Ranadive attacked Carrillo as a renegade, the last in a shameful line of 'revisionists' who had abandoned the path of revolution in favour of the softer option of reform.

The Indian communist charged his erstwhile comrade with six heresies in particular:

First, Carrillo thought that, at least in Western Europe, socialists and communists could now come to power via the ballot box rather than armed revolution. In Ranadive's paraphrase, "the central point of Carrillo's book is that there is absolutely no need for a revolution in the developed capitalist countries... According to him socialism can be achieved peacefully, without violating any of the rules of bourgeois democracy."

Second, Carrillo claimed that communist parties did not necessarily possess a monopoly on the truth. The Spanish Communist Party, Carrillo wrote, "no longer regards itself as the only representative of the working class, of the working people and the forces of culture. It recognises, in theory and practice, that other parties which are socialist in tendency can also be representative of particular sections of the working population."

Third, Carrillo held that private enterprise had a role to play in economic growth, albeit in alliance with the State. As the Spaniard put it, "the democratic road to socialism presupposes a process of economic transformation different from what we might regard as the classical model [of Marxism]. That is to say it presupposes the long-term co-existence of public and private forms of property."

Fourth, Carrillo argued that in the Cold War, Europeans should keep their distance from the Americans and the Soviets alike. As he wrote, "our aim is a Europe independent of the USSR and the United States, a Europe of the peoples, orientated towards socialism, in which our country will preserve its own individuality."

Fifth, Carrillo believed that Marx, Engels and Lenin were not infallible, and that their views were open to correction with the passage of time and the evidence of history.

Sixth, Carrillo believed that the Communist Party was not infallible either, and that—at least in nonpolitical matters—individuals should feel free to follow their own conscience. In Carrillo's formulation, "outside collective political tasks, each [party] member is master of his own fate, as regards everything affecting his preferences, intellectual or artistic inclinations, and his personal relations." Significantly, he added, "In the field of research in the sciences of every kind, including the humanities, different schools may co-exist within [the party] and they should all have the possibility of untrammelled confrontation in its cultural bodies and publications."

Reading Carrillo through the quotes provided by Ranadive, one cannot help but admire the Spanish communist for his honesty, his overdue but nonetheless brave recognition that the bloody history of his country (and continent) mandated a radical revision of the communist idea. But BT Ranadive saw it very differently. He spoke with contempt of Carrillo's faith in those "miserable parliamentary elections", and with even more disdain toward Carrillo's independence with regard to the Cold War. "Can any Communist," Ranadive fumed, "put the enemy of mankind, the gendarme of world reaction, American imperialism, on the same footing as Soviet Russia?"

Carrillo's argument that other political parties should exist, indeed that these parties might even sometimes be correct in their views, was seen by Ranadive as "giving a permanent charter of existence to non-Marxist, anti-Marxist and unscientific ideologies". In fact, it amounted to nothing less than a "liquidation of the Leninist concept of party". Further, the encouragement of a diversity of thought outside the sphere of politics was "the final denigration of the Marxist-Leninist Party in the name of freedom for all its members to profess any opinion they like on any subject". In contrast to the heterodox Spaniard, Ranadive insisted that "the Party's outlook and the outlook of its members is determined by their firm allegiance to Marxism-Leninism and must be consistent with it".

Ranadive's own riposte to the renegade Carrillo rested heavily on quotes from Marx, Engels and Lenin, the Holy Trinity whose works and words he himself never questioned, emended or—heaven forbid—challenged. The Indian communist complained that "Carrillo turns a blind eye to Lenin's teachings"; worse yet, "a large part of his argument is lifted from bourgeois writers and baiters of Marxism".

Carrillo's views, in fact, sound akin to those of the authors of the Indian Constitution. Parliamentary democracy based on universal adult suffrage, the proliferation of political parties, a mixed economy with space for both public and private enterprise, a nonaligned and independent foreign policy, the freedom of creative expression—these were the ideals enshrined in the Constitution that came into effect in 1950, and the ideals embraced by Santiago Carrillo some three decades later.

These ideals, however, remained anathema to a prominent Indian communist. It is necessary to point out here that it was the self-same BT Ranadive who, in 1948, led communists in an insurrection against the infant Indian state. At Independence, the general secretary of the then undivided Communist Party of India was PC Joshi, a cultured, sensitive man who understood that freedom had come through the struggle and sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Indians. A statement issued by the CPI thus acknowledged that the Congress party, led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, was "the main national democratic organization". The CPI said it would "fully co-operate with the national leadership in the proud task of building the Indian Republic on democratic foundation".

However, by the end of 1947, PC Joshi found his line challenged by the radical faction of the CPI. They claimed that the freedom that India had obtained was false—'*Ye Azaadi Jhoothi Hai*', the slogan went—and asked that the party declare an all-out war against the Government of India. The radicals were led by BT Ranadive, who saw in the imminent victory of the Chinese communists a model for himself and his comrades. A peasant struggle was already under way in Hyderabad, against the feudal regime of the Nizam. Why not use that as a springboard for an Indian revolution?

On 28 February 1948—four weeks after Gandhi's murder—the CPI leadership met in Calcutta, and confirmed that the revolutionary line would prevail. Joshi was replaced as general secretary by Ranadive, who declared that the Indian government was a lackey of imperialism, and would be overthrown by armed struggle. Party members were ordered to foment strikes and protests to further the cause of the revolution-in-the-making. Bulletins and posters were issued urging the people to rise up and "Set fire to the whole of Bengal", to "Destroy the murderous Congress government", and move 'forward to unprecedented mass struggles. Forward to storm the Congress Bastilles.'

The government, naturally, came down hard. Some 50,000 party members and sympathisers were arrested. These arrests forestalled Ranadive's plans to crystallise strikes in the major industrial cities of Bombay and Calcutta. It took some more time to restore order in Hyderabad, where a recalcitrant Nizam was refusing to join the Indian Union, egged on by militant Islamists (known as 'Razakars') who were making common cause with the local communists. But in September 1948 the Indian Army moved into Hyderabad; slowly, over a period of two years, the areas where the communists were active were brought back under the control of the state.

In 1950, the Ranadive line was formally abandoned, and the communists came overground to fight the general elections of 1952. In 1957, the undivided Communist Party of India came to power in Kerala, via the ballot box. Seven years later, the party split into two factions, the newer and more numerous group calling itself the Communist Part of India (Marxist). In 1967, the CPI(M) was part of winning coalitions in both West Bengal and Kerala. Later, in 1977 and 1980 respectively, they came to power in these states more or less on their own.

Since 1957, then, parties professing a creedal allegiance to 'Marxism-Leninism' have been in power for extended periods of time in several states of the Union. And yet, these successes could not succeed in reconciling leading communists to 'bourgeois' democracy. For BT Ranadive's critique of Santiago Carrillo was really a warning to those among his comrades who might likewise think of revising the classical postulates of Marxism-Leninism. It is quite extraordinary, yet also quite in character,

that Ranadive chose, so soon after his party had come to power by democratic means in the large and very populous state of West Bengal, to let loose this fusillade against parliamentary democracy, the mixed economy, freedom of expression and nonalignment in foreign policy.

III

I HAVE DISINTERTERRED BT Ranadive's views here not simply out of an historian's interest in the strangeness of the past. For the prejudices he held—and so vigorously articulated—are unfortunately still quite widespread in the CPI(M) today. In practice, the party's ideologues seem somewhat reconciled to parliamentary democracy, but they retain an aversion to private enterprise, are still hostile to intellectual debate and dialogue, and yet cling to a faith in their party's infallibility.

I have long held that the central paradox of Indian communism is that its practice is vastly superior to its theory. Where other kinds of politicians have eagerly embraced the Page 3 culture, many communists still do mix and mingle with the working people. Communist leaders and activists are probably more intelligent than their counterparts in other parties, and—by and large—more honest. (To be sure, there have been allegations of corruption in recent years against some Kerala CPI(M) leaders, but the amounts they are said to have pilfered are pitiful in comparison with scams associated with politicians in other parties.)

It may be that of all the major parties in India, it is only the leaders of the CPI(M) who do not have Swiss bank accounts. (Some do not even have Indian bank accounts.) Their views may be out-of-date, even bizarre, but in their conduct and demeanour most major leaders of the CPI(M) are—the word is inescapable—gentlemen. As a bourgeois friend of mine puts it, they are the kind of people in whose homes she can safely permit her teenaged daughter to spend the night.

That communist leaders are less greedy and corrupt, that they do not live or endorse luxurious lifestyles, is one very important reason why, despite their irrational and often antediluvian beliefs, they have enjoyed power for such long stretches in the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. In these three states they built their strength from the bottom up, by working with the poor and the excluded. They organised landless labourers, poor peasants, slum dwellers, industrial workers and the refugees of Partition in fighting for better wages, greater access to land, better housing facilities and the like.

Decades of patient and often selfless work with subaltern groups has resulted in success at the ballot box. In Kerala and Tripura this has been episodic, with communists alternating with Congress-led regimes. In West Bengal it has been continuous. Here, they held power uninterruptedly from 1977 to 2011.

(In terms of size and influence, Tripura does not compare with West Bengal and Kerala. I shall therefore exclude it from the rest of this essay, only noting that its CPI(M) chief ministers—Nripen Chakraborty, Dasarath Deb and now Manik Sarkar—have exemplified the unostentatious lifestyles and personal integrity characteristic of the best Indian communists.)

During its 34 years in power, the Left Front in West Bengal had but two chief ministers—Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. So far as I know, neither was corrupt. As men of culture, both appealed to the *bhadralok*, or the middle class. Yet their record as administrators is something else altogether. Under their leadership, West Bengal has performed poorly on conventional indicators of social and economic development. As the latest Annual Status of Education Report shows, the quality of teaching in schools in West Bengal is worse than in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Meanwhile, in terms of per capita income, West Bengal's rank among the large states of the Indian Union fell from 6th in 1981 to 11th in 2008. Some development economists place it in the 'backward' rather than the 'forward' group of states in India. This classification runs counter to the self-image of the Bengali *bhadralok* and of the Marxist, with the former claiming the legacy of India's first modernisers, and the latter claiming to constitute the vanguard of humanity itself.

The vanity and self-regard of the *bhadralok* does, or did, have a concrete basis. Bengal was once ahead of the rest of India. India's first modern social reformers, first modern entrepreneurs, first scientists of world class, first globally influential writers and filmmakers, all came from Bengal. On the other hand, Marxism's sense of its own superiority is harder to accept. Our scepticism is mandated not so much by the fall of the Berlin Wall, or by the barbarism and brutality of communist regimes before the Wall fell, but by domestic and provincial events. If, after all the advantages that West Bengal started with, it still lags behind the more advanced parts of India, surely the blame lies to a large extent with the party that ruled the state for the past three-and-a-half decades?

The Left Front, dominated by the CPI(M), came to power in West Bengal in 1977. In the first decade of its rule, it launched

Operation Barga, a programme to protect the rights of sharecroppers and tenants. This was mostly successful, and widely applauded. Yet it was not followed by reforms in other spheres. There was no effort to improve the school education system; in fact, by discouraging the teaching of English, the communists gave the children of the state a grave handicap (from which they are yet to recover). The state of public health remained as shambolic as before. The building of rural roads and bridges was not a priority.

If, apart from Operation Barga, rural development was largely given the go-by, the urban and industrial sectors suffered even greater neglect. Fear of working-class militancy led to the flight of capital to other states of India. The hatred of the West, so much a part of Indian communist discourse, turned off foreign investors. When the middle class reacted by voting against the Left Front, the latter responded spitefully, by relegating urban renewal further down their list of priorities.

One of the more unpleasant things about communists is their desire to capture and control public institutions. It was a desire the Bengal communists fully shared, and which they enacted on a large scale, in city and countryside. The police came under the control of the party cadres, helping them fix local elections and capture the panchayats. The appointing of senior bureaucrats and vice-chancellors was in the hands of the party.

The control of the bottom and from the top ensured control of the middle as well. The History Department of Calcutta University, once India's finest, was turned into a loyalty parade of the CPI(M). One had to be a member or sympathiser of the party to be appointed to a professorship. Thus, scholars as fine and productive as Gautam Bhadra, Lakshmi Subramanian, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Rudrangshu Mukherjee were pushed out of a department in which they had studied and taught. Ironically, these were all left-wing historians; but they were all independent-minded academics for whom scholarship always superseded party loyalty. Conditions were made so difficult for them that they had no option but to leave. This experience was entirely typical. What happened here, in a particular department of a particular university, occurred in dozens of other departments, universities, offices and corporations across West Bengal.

In 2006, after decades of demonising capitalism and capitalists, the Left Front in West Bengal decided to bring in the demons to develop their state. The Salim Group of Indonesia was allotted 40,000 acres to create a 'Special Economic Zone'. The major Indian industrial house, Tata, was invited to start a car factory. These projects, in Nandigram and Singur respectively, became controversial, since local peasants were not consulted about them, nor were they given any meaningful stake in them. Rather, their land was abruptly notified and taken over by the state; when the peasants protested, the police, aided by party cadres, attacked them, often brutally.

Forcible acquisition of agricultural land had been resisted in other parts of India. The Left Front in West Bengal could have forged a new model of industrialisation, by paying a fair market price for land, or by not buying land outright and instead paying a substantial annual rental, or by training and educating peasants beforehand, so that they could get well-paying jobs in the factories built on their land. Instead, both projects were implemented in an authoritarian, top-down manner.

One notable success of the CPI(M) in West Bengal has been the relative lack of communal violence. In 1984, when Sikhs were being butchered all across North India, the Sikhs of Kolkata—many of whom were taxi drivers, and hence very visible and vulnerable—were barely touched. The ripples of the Ayodhya movement never reached the state. Unlike in Odisha and Gujarat, missionaries in remote outposts have not been attacked. Sikhs, Muslims and Christians have felt safe in communist-ruled West Bengal—and have been made to feel safe.

What then of Kerala? Unlike West Bengal, this is a state that has an outstanding record in social development. Its literacy rates are comparable to, and its health services better than, the world's richest and most powerful country. What share of the credit for this must go to the communists?

The short answer is: a fair amount, but not as much as that commonly accorded to them by party followers or fellow travellers. The definitive account of the Kerala miracle is Robin Jeffrey's *Politics, Women and Well-Being* (1992). In this and other books, Jeffrey shows that the progress in education, health, gender and caste emancipation in Kerala is owed to a complex interplay of several factors, which include:

(1) The fact that one very numerous caste, the Nairs, are matrilineal. (2) The fact that another very numerous caste, the Ezhava, were organised by the remarkable Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928) to fight against Brahminical orthodoxy and liberate themselves through education. Notably, Narayana Guru's influence was not restricted to the Ezhavas alone. He was emulated by upper-caste and Muslim reformers, who likewise urged their followers to engage with and adapt to the modern world. (3) The fact that Kerala had progressive maharajas who built schools and sent brilliant students of all castes (and both

genders) on scholarships abroad. (4) The fact that the state also had very active Christian institutions which emphasised the importance of education, including women's education.

I do not want to apportion percentages, so I will not say that for the admirable performance of the Malayalis in the social sector, the communists should get exactly 20 percent of the credit, the balance being equally distributed among the other contenders. So let me put it qualitatively: their contribution has been more than modest, but less than definitive. In the absence of caste reformers, missionaries, maharajas, matriarchs, etc, the human development record of Kerala may have been closer to that of West Bengal's. It must also be said that the Congress in Kerala has been more socially progressive, and less morally corrupt, than the Congress in other states. When they are in power, they have maintained the quality of schools and hospitals, for example.

Where the Kerala communists perhaps deserve more credit (as they do in West Bengal) is in their energetic promotion of land reforms. On the other hand, and like their Bengali comrades again, they have packed universities and other state institutions with party loyalists, and promoted a culture of mindless militancy among organised workers, scaring off investors and entrepreneurs.

In economic terms, Kerala, unlike West Bengal, shall be placed with the forward rather than the backward states of the Union. The official state government website claims that the per capita income of Kerala is the highest in the country; more objective assessments place it sixth or seventh. Unlike West Bengal, there is no desperate poverty in Kerala. A key reason for this is the mass migration of Malayalis to the Persian Gulf. The economy of Kerala has, for some decades now, been kept afloat by remittances. This is not a sustainable model: What happens when the oil runs out? With the state's very high literacy rates, Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram, rather than Bengaluru and Hyderabad, should really have been in the forefront of the software revolution. One reason why this has not happened is the anti-industrialism and anti-Westernism of the CPI(M).

IV

IN AN ESSAY PUBLISHED on the eve of the 2009 general elections, I had hoped for the emergence of one or more of four alternatives to the identity politics of the present. These alternatives were: a Congress that was not beholden to the dynasty; a Bharatiya Janata Party that was not remote-controlled by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; a united and reform-oriented Left; and a new party altogether, one based on the aspirations of the expanding middle class.

Despite six decades of democracy and development, India remains a deeply inegalitarian country. One man in Mumbai can build himself a house 27 storeys high and 400,000 square feet in extent, while 60 percent of that city's population live in slums. Across cities and within states, there are large and perhaps growing inequalities of income, status, education and access to healthcare. However, the concerns of the underprivileged are rarely reflected in the media and rarely acted upon by the major political parties.

India needs a left—as do most Indians. A romantic may pin his hopes on the Naxalites, who seek to overthrow the bourgeois order by force of arms. The realist knows this dream is a (blood-soaked) fantasy. In that case, what kind of left must an Indian democrat hope for? Shortly after coming overground in 2006, the Nepali Maoist leader, Prachanda, said that multi-party democracy was the political system of the 21st century. This admission, or acknowledgement, has not yet come from the Indian Maoists—nor even from the CPI(M), who fight parliamentary elections, but do still somewhere believe in a one-party state controlled by themselves. It is this dogma that stopped them from joining governments at the Centre, such as those led by the Janata Dal in 1996 and by the Congress in 2004.

From the point of view of the national interest, the left's decision to keep away from these coalitions is undoubtedly to be deplored. For they would have provided a much needed stiffening to the Central government. The communist ministers would have been among the most articulate and intelligent members of the Union cabinet, and certainly the most honest. They would have shown a commitment to maintaining communal harmony. They would have acted as a stable counterpoint to the sectarian elements in the Janata Dal, and to the corrupt allies of the Congress.

However, I believe that from their own point of view as well, the decision of the communists to stay away from Central governments was a mistake. Here was a chance to put their own pet concerns—agrarian reform, political decentralisation, employment generation—on the national agenda. Here was an opportunity to make their talented leaders known and admired outside their bases in Kerala and West Bengal. By participating actively and creatively in government, the communists could have become, in both senses of the word, a properly national political formation.

A modern left must also stop playing, or replaying, the battles of the Cold War. Consider our relationship with the United States. The view of the CPI(M) (expressed in *People's Democracy* and in the editorial pages of *The Hindu*) is that one must always be suspicious of American intentions and always give the Chinese government the benefit of the doubt. Neither position is tenable. We should examine our relationship with both countries on a disaggregated basis. With both China and the US, India has identities of interest as well as conflicts of interest. What we do, or which side we take, depends on the sector, policy, controversy or case in question.

While Marx himself was a great champion of modern technology, Indian Marxists are technophobic. Their hostility to private enterprise is combined with a suspicion of innovation in general. In the 1980s and the 1990s, they resisted the computerisation of banks and railways. In protecting the interests of a relatively small constituency, the organised working class, they disregarded the tens of millions of ordinary consumers who benefited from computerisation.

But a modern left must also appeal to the middle class. This class will grow in numbers and influence in coming decades. Most middle-class people are revolted by the company that the leaders of the major parties keep, by their proximity to crooks and moneybags. Many are further disenchanted with the sycophantic tendencies of the Congress; many others detest the bigotry of the BJP. But they have nowhere else to go. Those disgusted by the First Family vote by default for the BJP; those who cannot abide Hindutva vote reluctantly for the Congress. If the left can modernise and present itself as a party of reform, a party that is inclusive and outward-looking, a party committed to social welfare but not opposed to economic growth, it could capture a vote bank that is far more numerous than that represented by its own current special interest, the organised working class.

Finally, the CPI(M) must abandon the Leninist dogma that it is the only party that understands and represents the interests of the poor and the excluded. This dogma has set them in opposition to activist groups that work outside the party's framework. In the 1980s, the CPI(M) made the foolish (and possibly tragic) mistake of dismissing Indian environmentalists as reactionary and anti-progress. I remember a CPI(M) friend telling me that the Chipko movement had to be opposed since it was against the working class. The felling of the Himalayan forests was, in his view, objectively necessary to create the industrial proletariat that would lead the revolution. That deforestation economically ruined hill peasants, or that it caused floods destroying countless villages in the plains, was of no matter to him.

The environmentalism of Chipko and the Narmada Bachao Andolan is an environmentalism of the poor. It defends the right to livelihood of peasants, artisans, pastoralists, fisherfolk and tribals. It has also outlined sustainable alternatives to development practices that deplete and destroy the basis of human life on earth. Yet the CPI(M) opposed this environmentalism of the poor; it also stood apart from groups such as the Self Employed Women's Association, which have enhanced the dignity and economic security of women working in the informal sector.

In 1985, the current general secretary of the CPI(M) published an extraordinary attack on these civil society groups, calling them fronts for American imperialism. The polemic had its roots in an ideology whose twin, complementary attributes are certitude and paranoia—only the Party knows the Truth, and anything undertaken outside the Party's auspices must necessarily be False. Farcical in all situations, the attitude is especially so in India, a land so varied and diverse that no single doctrine can contain or explain it.

These dogmas have cost the party dearly and inhibited its expansion into parts of India and among social groups whose predicament cannot be adequately understood through the lens of a philosophy developed on another continent in another century. And they have driven away the idealistic youth, whose wish has been to work with and for the poor, but who currently see a greater possibility of realising this hope in the company of Ela Bhatt and Medha Patkar than under the leadership of Prakash Karat and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

V

WHEN THE SOVIET UNION collapsed, the critic George Steiner wrote that this left a "black hole in the history of hope". Steiner was by no means a Marxist, but he had some appreciation of what that ideology had meant to the best and brightest of his generation. I have myself been, for some 30 years now, an anthropologist among the Marxists. I arrived in Kolkata in 1980, shortly after the CPI(M) came to power. I stayed for six years in that city, and still write a column for *The Telegraph*. I know the work of the Marxist activists of Kerala reasonably well, and know, probably too well, the work of the Marxist intellectuals at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

I am an unaffiliated liberal by choice, and a student of Marxism by habit. How must I view the rout of the CPI(M) in Kerala and,

especially, West Bengal? It is certainly a defeat for dogmatism and close-mindedness. I suppose that, as a critic of that dogmatism and close-mindedness, I should feel vindicated and even triumphant. I know that they had to go. Thirty-four years in power was too long. But one must not be tempted to write an epitaph. In Kerala, they will be back in five years. In West Bengal, the bhadralok intelligentsia may be nostalgic for them after five months. Mamata Banerjee will surely provide a different government; it is unlikely to be, in ways that matter, a better government.

Will the defeat of the CPI(M) make its cadres and leaders vengeful and even more dogmatic? Or will it chasten them, such that they look inwardly at the prejudices which have bound and damaged them for so long now? Can they become modern and, in all senses of the word, democratic?

Karl Marx himself welcomed and celebrated change, perhaps excessively and uncritically. For, under capitalism and even feudalism, human beings fashioned ideas and institutions whose value and relevance transcended those modes of production. To construct a more just social order it is not necessary that all that is solid must melt into air. But some things must change. For all their talk of transforming and shattering the system, however, Marxists—and more particularly Marxist-Leninists—are conservative in their attachment to past ideas and ideologies. To quote Alasdair MacIntyre again: "Originally a negative, sceptical, and subversive doctrine in liberal society, Marxism acquired, as it became a positive doctrine, precisely that kind of attachment to its own categories which it had already diagnosed in liberal theory as one of the sources of liberalism's inability to view society except through the distorting lens of its own categories."

"In terms of its attachment to its own categories, communism worldwide, including in India, has been deeply conservative. A modern, democratic and even properly Indian Marxism needs a strong dose of robust revisionism. Who or where will it come from? Who, now, will step up to be the Indian Eduard Bernstein (who abandoned the dogma of one-party dominance in Germany); the Indian Deng Xiaoping (who embraced the market in China); the Indian Santiago Carrillo (who spoke in favour of multiparty democracy, the mixed economy, an independent foreign policy, cultural pluralism and the autonomy of intellectual work—all at once)?

In the past, Indian Marxists have been chastised for their dependence on foreigners. The party congresses of the CPI(M) feature portraits of four men—Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin; that is to say, two 19th-century German intellectuals and two 20th-century Russian autocrats. No women, nor, more crucially, any Indians. In the 1960s, the Naxalites insisted that 'China's Chairman is our Chairman'. Their descendants, who now control a large swath of hill and forest in central India, still call themselves the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

It may be too much to hope that the CPI(M) shall replace their four foreign icons with (shall we say) Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Those thinkers have been appropriated by other parties anyway. What they can and should do, if they wish to renew their party and make it a force in Indian politics again, is to retain Marx (who was undoubtedly a thinker of genius) and find ways of incorporating the ideas, if not the images, of socialist thinkers who are far more relevant to India today than Lenin and Stalin.

The revisionism that is now called for would also mean, if not a formal burial, at least an unspoken disavowal, of the desi leaders who took them along those self-destructive paths in 1948, 1977, 1996, 2004 and so on. I note that the Delhi headquarters of CITU, the party's trade union, is named after BT Ranadive. I also note that the communist head of the BSNL employees union has written that "Com. BTR was one of the brilliant theoreticians as well as a mass leader of the toiling masses who analysed each and every situation critically and stood like a rock against all attacks from the ruling classes."

The word that sticks and stands out here is 'critically'. Piety and ancestor worship may demand it, but plain English and the facts of history suggest that this allegedly brilliant man tended to analyse complex political situations mechanically. In 1948, he thought he would become the Indian Mao and come to power via the barrel of a gun; in 1978, he fancied himself as the Indian Lenin, who would vanquish the renegades and heretics. The first time, he disregarded the social history of his own country; the second time, he disregarded the commitment of his compatriots to incremental reform under the conditions of multiparty democracy. Had the party had the wisdom and the courage to support PC Joshi after Independence, instead of taking the adventurist line advocated by BT Ranadive, by now the communists would not be known for their insularity, both geographical and intellectual, but for having a visible and largely beneficial presence in India as a whole. Had Ranadive himself accepted and endorsed the sagacious advice offered to communists by Santiago Carrillo in the late 1970s, he would have been 30 years behind the Indian Constitution. But he might have saved his party from 30 mostly wasted years nevertheless.